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Centennial Interview- Ralph Boehnke, Jr.



Pictured here are Ralph's parents, his father Ralph Boehnke, Sr. on the far right and second to the left is his mother, Margarete Boehnke, during a 1955 Annual Meeting at Virginia Beach.

During the LPA's centennial year, we will look back on the transformation of the industry and celebrate the association and the members who contributed over the years. Special thanks to Dennis Pope for his interview below of Ralph Boehnke, Jr, of Eberbach Corporation, a semi-retired professional who was active in the LPA and is part of a four generation legacy in the industry.

In 1918, twenty-one companies formed the charter membership of the Association of Scientific Apparatus Makers, which ultimately became the Laboratory Products Association. One of those founding members was Eberbach & Son Company, which is today Eberbach Corporation and has the distinction of being the oldest LPA member company. The LPA recently sat down with Ralph Boehnke, Jr. who served as the company's CEO for many years and was very active in the LPA.

What years did you serve in a leadership role at the LPA?

I was on the Board of Directors of the Laboratory Apparatus Section (precursor to the LPA) of SAMA in the early- to mid-1970s time-frame. However, my father (Ralph Boehnke, Sr.) served as CEO of Eberbach in the 1960s and 70s and was active in SAMA and my grandfather (Oscar Boehnke) worked at the company as well. My son Trip (Ralph Boehnke, III) is the CEO of the company today and is very active in the LPA. So, this makes four generations of Boehnke's that have been involved with Eberbach and the LPA.



Ralph Boehnke, Jr. and his wife, Isabel (Ibbie)
at a SAMA Meeting

What were some of the major issues the association was dealing with at that time?

Back then government regulations were important to us and for SAMA to watch out for. Many members were small "mom and pop" companies that could not monitor these on their own and relied on SAMA to keep them informed and go to bat for them and their interests.

Is there a specific SAMA/LPA meeting that stands out and why?

One of the most interesting meetings I attended was one of the first meetings I attended in 1977 in Washington, D.C. President Gerald Ford was the keynote speaker. After the meeting concluded, members went to visit their Congressmen and Senators on Capitol Hill. A very exciting and memorable meeting.

Another meeting that comes to mind was at the Woodlawn Resort in Arizona. Half of the attendees came down with food poisoning!

The meetings were always very important, not just from a business aspect, but a social one as well. Everyone brought their spouses to the meetings back then, which you don't see as much today. The annual meetings always had a formal dinner in which the men wore tuxedos and the spouses wore gowns. Of course, that changed over the years as the men got tired of having to bring tuxedos to the meetings.

How about the changes you have seen in the industry from when you started to what you know about it today?

I learned very early on that SAMA was very "clicky" whether that was good or bad. A lot of that had to do with whom was competing with whom.



Ralph (Trip) Boehnke III, a fourth generation industry professional, pictured here with his wife, Sam, during a 2011 LPA Meeting.

I did develop great relationships. I got to know the Ohaus family very well as their son Jim was coming into the industry as the same time as me. My family and theirs were good friends and they invited us to various receptions and events. As a result, I got to know many of the dealers in the industry. I meet the Welchs the Sargants and others who were prominent in the industry and from the Chicago area where SAMA was started. Many of these companies ended up buying each other out, which took away my being able to call a "best friend" from one of these companies directly to see what was going on, but rather 2nd tier level people who were not as informed. But, this was happening in other industries as well.

Where do you see the industry heading?

I believe science is too important in our lives and for all of us to think that this industry is not going to be around. It is going to morph in to I think more direct and less middle-men in between. The industry will morph differently for different people.

What are you doing these days?

I am not 100% retired. I still go into the office pretty much every day except in the winter when I go to Florida and play golf.

Please visit www.lpanet.org/history for more about the history of the Laboratory Products Association, to include the story of SAMA and the LPA's part in the evolution of the scientific industry.